

Weary Battle Against the Weeds

FROM A CORRESPONDENT

IN spite of the cold spell, the soil temperature, so my meteorological friends tell me, is two or three degrees above normal. This is an encouraging sign, because if we get plenty of sunshine and the soil temperatures rise, the dangers of damaging late frosts will be somewhat reduced. But, as the soil temperature rises, so the weed seeds begin to germinate, and once more the weary battle against the weeds begins. It is salutary at the beginning of each new season to take stock of the weapons we can employ in this never ending battle. But first let us be sure that we have the best tools available for the job to-day.

There have been improvements in hoe design in recent years, and the rust resisting steel-handled hoe is undoubtedly a delightful tool to use. There is also a wavy-edged hoe shaped like a stirrup which fairly rips through the ground and makes light work of hoeing. The golden rule is to hoe when there are no weeds and then there never will be any weeds. One tends too often to leave the hoeing until the weeds have gained a firm hold, then it is harder work, it takes longer, and chopped off weeds have to be raked from the ground, thus adding further labour. Incidentally, this raking of the weed is bad for the tilth, because when the soil is raked smooth a heavy downpour of rain will "pan" the surface, always a bad thing. The ideal is to leave the hoed surface rough.

New Chemicals

Much concentrated work is being done with new chemicals to help us in our problems of weed destruction. There is no small retail pack available yet of the pre-emergent weedkillers which are being tried extensively in commercial nurseries. Yet it seems probable that before long we shall have available for the amateur chemicals which will keep our weeds firmly under control. Those with fairly large areas of shrubs or fruit bushes can now purchase a chemical which will prevent the growth of couch grass without harming the crops. If it is used very carefully, and strictly according to the maker's instructions, good results may be obtained.

On paths, courtyards, and similar places, we have in the past used sodium chlorate to good effect. It has a disadvantage in that it can seep in the ground for quite considerable distances, and can destroy plants and even large trees. A heavy storm can wash sodium chlorate into parts of the garden where it would not be welcome. Therefore, we are happy to have a new chemical—simazin—which is apparently as effective as sodium chlorate, does not penetrate very deeply into the ground, and does not seep any appreciable distance in the soil. For paths one good spraying at this time of the year should keep the weeds under control for at least 12 months.

Excellent Suppressor

But with all these chemical controls, we should not lose sight of the fact that a mulch is an excellent suppressor of weeds. It does not matter very much what we use to mulch our beds and borders with—peat, sawdust, even straw is useful among fruit bushes, and in places where we do not mind it looking a little unsightly. In many parts of the country sawdust is available at very reasonable prices—in the Southampton area, for example, it can be purchased for £7 10s. a ton, delivered in paper bags within any reasonable lorry distance of that town. It should be remembered, however, that cellulose wastes, like sawdust or straw, are attacked by bacteria and rotted down. These bacteria need nitrogen to live and will extract it from the soil, sometimes creating a temporary nitrogen shortage. For this reason, a hundredweight of sulphate of ammonia should be applied for every ton of sawdust spread on the ground or dug in. I like to spread my sawdust mulch over the beds or borders and then scatter sulphate of ammonia on at the appropriate rate. Spent hops, often obtainable very cheaply from our local brewery, make an excellent mulch, but they do not have any great manurial value. Spent mushroom compost from a mushroom nursery is also excellent value, and I use it extensively in my own garden. Now is the time to lay in a stock of mulch material. We may get good hoeing weather in April, and once the ground is clean, a mulch or layer two or three inches thick of any of these materials will save us many hours of hoeing or weeding in the summer.

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The Times (London, England), Saturday, Mar 21, 1959; pg. 9; Issue 54415. (772 words)

Category: News

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Gale Document Number:CS151477365